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This paper focuses on Gloria Swanson's career in silent film as a particularly compelling case of modern stardom and its exchanges with the cinematic medium and the public. While her early films establish her as one of the first stars and glamour icons in the history of Hollywood, Swanson's screen appearances also develop a remarkable self-reflexivity which both enacts and undermines the mythical structures underpinning star bodies in their public and medial constructions. In my discussion of selected scenes from *Male and Female* (1919), *Stage Struck* (1925) and *Queen Kelly* (1929), I trace the overdetermined *mise-en-scène* of Swanson's star body, her direct audience address as well as her protean performance between glamour and corporeal comedy. At the same time, I show how in drawing on both earlier cinematic traditions and the cultural license of the 1920s, Swanson's specific stardom differs from other star treatments.

1 "Nobody ever leaves a star"*

When towards the end of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) the former silent film star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) is about to be left by the much younger unsuccessful screenplay writer Joe Gillis (William Holden), she argues that "no one ever leaves a star – that's what makes one a star." A few moments later her revolver shots send Gillis falling into the swimming pool, from where his ghostly voice-over has been addressing us all along so as to verbally control the narrative of his chance encounter with the ageing star in her anachronistic 1920s Hollywood mansion. Yet Desmond herself – insisting on her enduring stardom as well as on the vengeful Salome script which she has written and now literally enacted – remarks in her grand melodramatic pose, just before the frame showing her figure comes to be superimposed with the watery blur of the pool, that "stars are ageless, aren't they?"

While today's public sphere is marked by an obsession with 'personality' and media attention, which have come to permeate not only the domain of entertainment but also politics and the arts, we tend to forget that the construction of stars is both a relatively recent and historically specific phenomenon. My paper returns to Gloria Swanson and her career in silent film not simply to revisit a star who, apart from her screen comeback as Norma Desmond, has been largely forgotten. More important, Swanson represents a particularly compelling case of modern stardom, its medial conditions and exchanges with the public. It is therefore to explore how the public body of the star is (re)produced in the early period of classical Hollywood cinema that I should like to shed light on her silent film performances.

In her return in Wilder's homage to Hollywood's past almost twenty years after her own disappearance from film, Swanson as Desmond has her one-time director now turned butler Max, played by Swanson's former director Erich von Stroheim, project her celluloid screen memories in the mansion's built-in home cinema. While watching the dramatically lit Swanson close-ups in Stroheim's *Queen Kelly* (1929), the involuntarily retired actress reminisces about the great bygone era of silent film and, in so doing, emphatically argues that in contrast to contemporary stars "we didn't need dialogue, we had faces."

Clearly Desmond invokes the face as the privileged medium of communication in silent film. Yet her simultaneous insistence on the monumentality of the face in the silent era – "I am big – it's the pictures that got small!" – also raises questions that are at the very core of modern stardom. What is the relation between the star's individuality and her medial image, type or trademark, which inevitably entails a reduction to certain traits? In what sense do the star's public bodies form prominent inter-faces for a discussion of the relationship between the cinematic medium and the public sphere? And how, finally, do the specific poetics of Swanson's 'face' as well as her exchange with the public differ from other star treatments? Swanson, as I shall argue in the following, occupies a transitional position in the emergence of modern stardom. While she represents one of the very first Hollywood stars, her performances – perhaps because they reverberate with remnants and residues of other strands and traditions – provide her with a protean mobility that is characteristic of her stardom and the specific ways in which it highlights the materiality and mediality of her public bodies.

2 Star Economy

"I have decided that when I am a star," Swanson is said to have declared in the early stages of her stellar career, "I will be every inch and moment a star. Everybody from the studio gateman to the highest executive will know it" (quoted in Quirk 1984: 23; Tapert 1998: 16). Indeed even though she was not the first actress to appear on screen, Gloria Swanson is often considered to have inaugurated classical Hollywood stardom (Tapert 1998: 12, 16). Famous for her opulent lifestyle and extravagant expenses, she was the first Hollywood actress bound by contract to always wear fashionable clothes in public (Tapert 1998: 20). In press releases, Paramount promoted her as the second star to earn a million. Mary Pickford had already done so earlier, but Swanson was "the first to spend it" (quoted in Tapert 1998: 23; Basinger 1999: 223).

What distinguishes the star Swanson from earlier "picture personalities" is the medial publicity surrounding her figure.[1] In contrast to other performers, she is "every inch and moment a star" because her exchanges with the public and the media produce an artificial star body in addition to her screen personae. By wearing for instance the same luxurious type of clothes in her cinematic performances and other public appearances (Tapert 1998: 20), Swanson not only merged her on- and offscreen personae but, in so doing, also consolidated her universal glamour image. The fashioning of her stardom proved to be so effective that her female fans sought to reproduce her public body.[2] When for instance she wore a gown with only one sleeve, or when she once lost an expensive earring and refused to retire the remaining one, they followed her lead by wearing single sleeves or earrings as well (Tapert 1998: 21; Swanson 1980: 193).

While projecting a glamour image in her numerous media appearances, Swanson's stardom was simultaneously anchored in her close contact with the public. When she returned to the U.S. after filming *Madame Sans-Gêne* (1925), the first major film of an American star made in Europe, the American public offered her and her third husband, the aristocrat Henri Marquis de la Falaise de la Coudraye, a particularly warm welcome.[3] On her cross-country trip from New York City to California, her train had to stop again and again since huge fan crowds and official delegations were gathering along the railway track. On the night of the West Coast premiere of her new film, Hollywood's elite paid her tribute by singing "Home, Sweet Home." Only a few minutes later Swanson was instructed to secretly leave the theater because the police forces outside were no longer able to hold back the enthusiastic crowds.

Implicit in this brief account of Swanson's construction of and the public fascination for her glamorous persona are several core elements of modern stardom. It is in a complex constellation of medial technology, consumerist economy and collective fantasy that modern stars emerge. Their bodies are artificially constructed for a public, and they simultaneously draw on public fantasies and desires. What Roland Barthes says about mass culture – that it shows us what to desire in case we do not already know – also applies to stars (Barthes in Cook 1999: 33). Yet equally valid is another argument: the director Cecil B. DeMille, with whose films Swanson attained international fame, claimed that "[t]he public, not I, made Gloria Swanson a star" (quoted in Tapert 1998: 20; Basinger 1999: 216).[4] At stake, therefore, is a complex exchange between the cinematic medium, the star and the public sphere. Stars literally give body to collective fantasies and values and, in so doing, both draw on and promote a complex economy of both identification and desire.

My first example from the opening sequence of DeMille's *Male and Female* (1919) illustrates precisely this: Swanson's medial construction for and her fantasmatic exchange with her audience. The film turns around Lady Mary Lasenby who is shipwrecked together with her aristocratic clan on a desert island where their resourceful butler William Crichton (Thomas Meighan) becomes not only leader of the group and island king but also Mary's love interest. In typical DeMille fashion, *Male and Female* indulges in visual excess and decadence, even on the isolated island and especially in an exotic, extravagantly furnished fantasy scene in which Crichton, as a Babylonian king, tosses his recalcitrant slave Mary, first dressed in a leopard skin and then in a white gown bedecked with pearls and an enormous feathery headgear, to half a dozen live lions. Yet of particular interest for the production and presentation of the star body is the introductory sequence which merges the character Mary Lasenby and the star Gloria Swanson in its visual spectacle. In a remarkable *mise-en-abîme*, our look is doubled by a boy servant who delivers the shoes of the family members to their respective bedroom doors, each time peeping through the keyhole at the waking or still sleeping aristocrats. While he is either bemused or annoyed by all the other characters, it is significantly enough Swanson's figure who receives privileged treatment by his excited and prolonged look. Initially his gaze is directed at exquisite pieces of lace lingerie and silk stockings before his focus shifts to a splendid display of Swanson, whose body, in contrast to the previous figures, can be seen in its entirety lying on an opulently decked-out bed.[5]

Condensing her diegetic performance as high-society heiress and her glamorous star image, the visual arrangement of this scenario displays the luxurious underwear and bed as metonymical extensions of Swanson herself. In a similar way Swanson's figure forms the pivot of a subsequent scene showing nothing but her elaborate bath ceremony: After two servants prepare the bath and shower, check the water temperature, add salts and rose water, Lady Mary alias Swanson majestically steps into the elegant sunken bath, scrubs her back with a loofah and, always assisted by her servants, takes a shower. In both scenes, the narrative flow is halted, while Swanson's body both is and is not eroticized at one and the same time. On the one hand, she possesses power in her ability to hold the gaze of her diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences as well as to arrest the narrative flow in favor of a spectacle which, however, centers not so much on her as an eroticized body but as the owner of desirable commodities which surround her and which she can be seen to enjoy. On the other hand, the cinematic medium objectifies her by presenting her at the center of an arresting *mise-en-scène* of wealth and consumer goods. In so doing, the scenes from *Male and Female*, similar to Swanson's other films with DeMille, foreground what is at stake in all star representations, namely the public production of signs and images over individual bodies.

In fact it is the creation of a sign or image that defines modern stardom. While earlier forms of fame were primarily based on the aura of political power, origin and achievement, modern celebrity and stardom are characterized by a potentially charismatic medial effect.[6] The (re)production and circulation of both literal images and a figurative 'image' require the technology of modern mass media, notably photography and film. However, while early film performers were neither identifiable owing to the predominance of long shots and theatrical *tableaux* nor individualized by any additional information on their 'private' lives, the public film star body becomes conceivable only by virtue of an 'image' produced by an inter- and metatextual network of both roles and offscreen publicity. The star image of Swanson was largely defined by her appearance in the six romantic comedies which she made together with DeMille from 1919 to 1921. As Basinger writes, DeMille "turned her into a symbol of a particularly new kind of American woman: sophisticated, soignée, and definitely not a virgin" (1999: 208). Even though they are at the end always reunited with their spouses, Swanson's heroines enjoy flirtatious affairs and, perhaps even more so, their extravagant clothes. Addressing primarily female spectators, this screen image was supplemented by the publicity of Swanson's opulent lifestyle, of her dramatic liaisons and serial marriages, which was propagated by press releases, fan magazines, fashion features as well as interviews with her provocative comments, for instance on her belief in the institution of divorce rather than of marriage.[7]

As also suggested by Swanson's position as a glamour icon, the transformation into an image means that stars come to represent secondary meanings and values, or what Roland Barthes would call lived myths (Barthes 2000). Both on- and offscreen, stars typically enact mythical fantasies, turning most prominently on beauty, wealth, fame and, above all, compelling self-invention. Both produced by and defining the Hollywood system, they draw on the American Dream, which Florian Keller describes as a "democracy of stardom" (Keller 2005: 59). In other words, stars give body to a promise as well as a demand that each individual successfully refashion her- or himself. In their medial exchange between star and audience, DeMille's films transmit precisely this dream. Moreover, they tap into an economy of production and consumption and the idea that the latter represents an act of individual expression. Yet stars are not only prominent consumers of luxurious commodities. They are themselves commercial assets, which the film industry uses to promote and sell its cinematic products, while they also represent commodities which are 'consumed' by the public.

Drawing on this star economy, *Male and Female* represents at once a satire and a celebration of "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 2007). The title cards introducing the cast and their roles ironically refer to the reality checks the spoilt leisure class is about to face: The arduous living conditions on the desert island quickly lead to a temporary class inversion and a redefinition of social values. The final return to the accustomed social order entails a painful sacrifice on the part of the Swanson character, whereas the happy end is reserved for Crichton and the scullery maid Tweeny, who marry and sail for America, where they successfully reinvent themselves as an independent farmer couple. Yet as suggested by the cinematic *mise-en-scène* of the opening scene, where the camera is aligned with the look and fascination of the boy servant, the film does promote a fantasy exchange turning on Swanson's glamour image. Even though the romantic desire of Lady Mary is ultimately thwarted, the film's material display and visual splendor simultaneously appear to inspire admiration and aspiration in the servant. In view of the stardom economy, which turns on analogous configurations, we can therefore say that even though the great majority of spectators will never be able to realize forms of success comparable to the ones displayed by stars both on- and offscreen, the dream scenarios offered by figures like Swanson exert fascination. They invite vicarious enjoyment as well as psychic proximity through fantasy, desire and identification.

3 Burlesque Body

Stardom harbors a dilemma that haunts many public figures, namely the sense that the medial image is reductive. Often the transformation of an individual body into a public one is seen as a form of depletion and the emphasis on 'personality' as a precarious balance between type and individuality. Foregrounding a related paradox, John Belton suggests that "stars become stars when they lose control of their images, which then take on a life of their own" (Belton 2005: 100). Yet perhaps because she is a transitional figure marking the very beginning of classical Hollywood stardom, there appears to be no such friction in the case of Swanson.[8] On the contrary, she is able to both symbolize Hollywood stardom and to undercut her glamour image.

Already in *Male and Female*, one of the very first films she made as an established star, the glamorous *mise-en-scène* of her persona is overdetermined. Not only is the film's material opulence both embraced and satirized, but it also harks back to the so-called "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1986, 2004). Predating the arrival of narrative film, this cinematic mode is characterized primarily by its fascination for cinematic technology as such, notably for the camera's ability to capture objects, bodies and their movements as well as the immediate impact these have on the sensual perception of cinema audiences. On the one hand, Swanson's films were produced at a time when classical Hollywood was firmly installing itself with its cinematic techniques, narrative conventions, psychological motivation and star system. On the other hand, they repeatedly feature moments that draw on earlier traditions and allow Swanson to refract her glamorous star image.

As emphasized by film historians, early cinema was in many respects heterogeneous. Formally and spatially it was closely related to vaudeville and other forms of popular entertainment (see McDonald 2000: 23). Since film performers were often also stage performers, it was possible in variety shows to see the same acrobat doing real somersaults and a moment later appearing on screen. Likewise the discontinuities of early film's non-narrative spectacle, its "series of displays" (Gunning 1986: 65) and "visual shocks" (Gunning 2004: 864) resemble the disconnected acts in variety shows. If classical narrative cinema comes to be based on a voyeuristic set-up with the spectator spying on the representation of characters in a fictional world which is not aware of his or her spectatorship, early cinema can be said to create a show of bodies that acknowledges the audience (McDonald 2000: 23).

Furthermore, the cinema attracted socially diverse groups, including immigrants, children and women, who thus became participants of an "alternative public sphere" (Hansen 1991: 90-125). The female figures they would see on screen in the 1910s were not limited to the virtuous personae of Victorian Lillian Gish and 'American Sweetheart' Mary Pickford, but also included burlesque figures such as Mabel Normand, who acted in silent film comedies.[9]

Swanson's screen performances can be seen to draw on the cultural license of the 1920s, which had a liberating effect especially for women, but at the same time, they are also inspired by this earlier cinematic legacy, especially in their repeated direct audience address as well as their material and physical spectacle. While DeMille established her fame as a style icon together with her screen persona as a modern woman, many of her later films attempt to transcend the glamour image which his films constructed for her. Rewriting her onscreen persona in the course of the 1920s, Swanson plays widely different roles, ranging from a feisty ex-prostitute (*Sadie Thompson*, 1928) to a virginal convent girl turned brothel owner (*Queen Kelly*, 1929), from an acclaimed actress to a clumsy waitress (both in *Stage Struck*, 1925). To some extent the author of her star body and, in the late 1920s, the producer of her own films, Swanson, however, also returns to slapstick comedy. Significantly enough, this is not only the register in which, though reluctantly, she started her career in Mack Sennett comedies, but also a mode from which women were to be largely excluded in the classical Hollywood star system. One can argue that with the advent of sound, the physical energy of silent film acting migrates to language – especially in the romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, which in many respects draw on and elaborate DeMille's remarriage plots and where the female heroines have at least as much verbal wit as their male counterparts. Corporeal comedy, however, appears to be the prerogative of male comedians and is only rarely linked to the idealized and often eroticized bodies of female stars.

It is, therefore, all the more remarkable that Swanson should straddle classical stardom and the grotesque body of slapstick comedy. In many of her films, the glamorous and the comic are never far apart – including *Sunset Boulevard*, where quoting her previous Charlie Chaplin act in *Manhandled* (1924), she entertains the screenplay writer Gillis with another Chaplin imitation.

Yet probably nowhere else is the association of her star body with burlesque comedy more prominent and self-reflexive than in Allan Dwan's *Stage Struck* (1925). Here Swanson forms the center of a series of comic acts and accidents. While in other burlesque silent films of the time, female figures usually feature in subsidiary romantic story lines and hence as mere catalysts for the burlesque main plot of the male protagonists, Swanson's genre and gender reversal relegates her male counterpart, the pancake cook Orme Wilson (Lawrence Gray), to the position of a romantic object, which merely serves as a trigger for the corporal comedy acted out by herself.[10]

Working in a cheap restaurant, Swanson's character, the clumsy waitress Jenny Hagen, dreams of a career as a celebrated actress – a daydream scenario which is spectacularly staged by the colored opening sequence. This fantasy is, however, less motivated by her own desire to be a star actress than by her stage-struck colleague and his obsession with stage actresses. As a true fan, Orme has decorated his room with countless pictures of his idols, while he seems oblivious of Jenny. She, in turn, believes that she could attract his desire if only she were a celebrated actress. Significantly enough, her attempts to redirect his attention repeatedly result in comic slapstick numbers, which undercut both Jenny's romantic plot and Swanson's glamorous star image. Her clownish theatricals and Orme's reprimands soon inspire the running gag "I did it to be funny."

The initial sequence at the restaurant establishes precisely this: Swanson's corporal comedy in her struggle with the materiality of objects and the laws of gravity. With comic timing, Jenny precariously balances her tray through crowds of guests and masses of factory workers. At one point, she tosses it into the air to collect a few cups in free fall before it comes down again in slow-motion, but breakage cannot entirely be avoided. Helping out Orme, she tries to imitate his dexterous handling and flipping of wheat-cakes, but instead of returning to the pan, her first specimen vanishes in the décolleté of a corpulent woman, while the second one lands on Jenny's head, where it continues to steam to the amusement of the crowd and Orme. Yet Jenny's imitation of actresses is also funny. Emulating the performer poses displayed in Orme's picture gallery and the gestures described in an acting manual, her attempts comically depart from her models – an effect which is heightened by Jenny's grotesque distortion in an anamorphotic mirror. When after the arrival of the showboat named "Water Queen," Orme starts to date the actress Lillian Lyons (Gertrude Astor), Jenny is determined to "take lessons from the enemy." If Lyons herself can be regarded as a parody of (hyper)femininity, Jenny's imitation of her make-up, hairdo, clothes, expression and gait looks completely clownish and grotesque – "you look like an accident," Orme remarks with good reason.

The film's climax is a female boxing match with which Jenny seeks to prove her stage talent to Orme and which harks back to burlesque variety shows. Wearing oversize pants and a black stocking over her clownishly painted face, petite Masked Marvel, alias Kid Sockem, challenges and competes against her tall rival Lillian Lyons as Kid Bellows.

Once again, Jenny's plan misfires: Instead of admiration, her knockout triggers riotous laughter in the audience, while the revelation of her identity provokes Orme's anger. Jenny desperately jumps into the river. Trying to find and rescue her, Orme paddles in the water, but in yet another comic turn, Jenny's enormous pants have been caught on the prow of the showboat. Dangling in mid-air, she learns from Orme that he would never marry an actress but has been saving money to open a pancake restaurant together with her. Accordingly, the last scene shows the couple in their new restaurant with Jenny in the very last shot looking directly at the film audience and fixing a sign saying "No actresses allowed."

As in the final scene, the impetus of the film as a whole is strongly ironical. Swanson's comic slapstick and her ill-fitting clothes challenge gender norms by undermining the erotic femininity usually displayed by female stars in romantic plots. While Jenny wants the attention and desire of Orme, her slapstick numbers foreground her body as comic agent rather than as an object of desire. At the same time, *Stage Struck* also suggests a shrewd comment on celebrity culture. The film introduces a meta-reflexive level by casting Swanson and by playing on her particular star image – the glamour established by her DeMille films – as well as her status as one of Hollywood's first stars. That the film evolves not only around Jenny and her pursuit of stage-struck Orme but also refers to the star economy in general and Gloria Swanson in particular is explicitly staged by the elaborate opening sequence. Following the credits "Gloria Swanson in Stage Struck: An Allan Dwan Production," a number of title cards alternate with shots of Swanson wearing ever more incredible outfits, again and again acknowledging and basking in the admiration of her frenetically applauding audiences.

After the first title card – "[t]he greatest actress of all time" – we see a close-up of Swanson framed by a white lace veil as she reciprocates the look of the enthusiastic diegetic audience, which stands in for the real film spectators. As in the film's last shot, Swanson appears to address and bond with her real audience, thus suggesting at once a theatrical reference and self-ironical distance. Not only is there a brief moment during the actress's reception by European aristocrats ("[t]he crowned heads of Europe in rivalry to render fitting honours") in which Swanson directly looks and winks at us, but the sequence as a whole both celebrates and debunks the stardom which she stages. Given the presence on screen and the simultaneous importance of the image, star acting inevitably highlights an interplay between fictional character and star and thus "the essential artifice that underlines stardom" (Belton 2005: 124). But not only that: in this sequence Swanson explicitly plays herself, and she does so in order to signal self-reflexive irony. It is to this effect that her appearance in the sequence combines hyperbolic comments – "[n]o role too difficult – each a triumph adding new lustre to a name already glorious ... [a] beauty dazzling all eyes – an art moving millions by its magic" – with meta-textual references to the stardom established by her career: the boundless enthusiasm of her audience, her aristocratic connection as the first Hollywood star to marry into European aristocracy as well as her influence as a fashion icon – "[e]ach new whim of attire accepted by the world of elegance as fashion's decree."[11]

The hyperbolic – and hence ironic – gesture is yet further underlined towards the end of the sequence. When the actress sits at the huge banquet table, the cook, embodied by Orme, proposes a toast to actresses in general: "To those who add glamour to our living – to those whose beauty is more than that of other women – to those who command our laughter, our tears, our dreams – to actresses!" Yet Swanson's actress gets up to interject that "you shall forget that there is any actress in the world but me." Following her declaration, she ascends a flight of stairs and then triumphantly walks down again in her role as Salome carrying the head of John the Baptist on a tray.[12] At this moment, the colored opening sequence fades into the black-and-white scene of Jenny Hagen daydreaming in the restaurant and tilting her tray until its plate falls to the ground. Now at the very latest do we realize that this is not a glamorous star vehicle in the manner of DeMille but the wishful daydream scenario of Jenny Hagen.

Significant about *Stage Struck* is the fact that playing herself, Swanson offers a self-reflexive commentary on celebrity as one of the earliest representatives of the Hollywood star system. The opening segment of the film stages a veritable star pageant, in which stardom and the figure of the star are (re)produced as a conglomerate of phrases, poses and gestures. In her exchange with the extra-diegetic audience, Swanson's exaggerated star attitudes and her hyperbolic adulation create a self-ironical distance – to the star economy, which she embodied so prominently at the time, as well as to her own glamour image. At the end of the film, the celebrity scenario is abandoned, while all-but-glamorous Jenny Hagen offers another possibility of identification. Yet even though the plot ultimately rejects public performance, *Stage Struck* works only because Swanson *is* a star performer. Ultimately it is thanks to her established star status that her embodiment of Jenny Hagen and her comic slapstick allow her to reach beyond her glamour image.

4 Swanson's Faces

As I have been arguing, Swanson's star body is exceptional both in its protean mobility and ironic self-reflexivity. While her public bodies are medially produced like those of other stars, she nevertheless escapes any stable image and instead mediates between glamour and 'groundedness,' between extravagant stardom and uncompromising self-parody. She comes nowhere close to the exoticism that characterizes the period's most popular male star, Rudolph Valentino, with whom she co-stars in *Beyond the Rocks* (1922) and who became the object of female mass hysteria due to the passionate and brutal physicality with which he embodied his outlandish sheiks and Latin lovers.[13] Nor does she, in her permanent accessibility to the media and the public, resemble the reclusive persona and elevated distance of Greta Garbo, who is to be worshipped at one remove. While the face of Garbo, according to Barthes, represents "the absolute mask," "an archetype of the human face" (Barthes 2000: 56), lit in countless close-ups, among them the final shot in *Queen Christina*, where Garbo's figure sails towards an open future, Swanson never fully arrives in an idealized, let alone 'divine' image.

Not only did Swanson, aware of her irregular features, elude perfection by always refusing DeMille's plans to have her nose reconstructed (Tapert 1998: 21), but she also counteracts any mythical sedimentation of her persona in and through her screen performances. As a result she is never consumed by her star image. Similarly there is nothing fragile or vulnerable about her public bodies. Her resourceful resilience and self-reflexivity are far removed from the often tragic fate of other stars struggling with their respective public images. In the words of the film historian Jerome Charyn, Swanson is "the first actress who literally made love to the camera" (Charyn 1996: 98). Yet in so doing, she avoids the ambivalence which later female stars such as Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe experience in relation to their sexualized bodies. Instead she enacts what I would call an unendangered physicality – a corporeality which is not limited to the erotic and which exceeds the classical body of especially feminine stardom.

The protean performance of Swanson's public bodies is particularly prominent in an early scene of Erich von Stroheim's unfinished *Queen Kelly* (1929), which couples comic humor and angry determination, erotic innocence and bawdy corporeality over Swanson's face and body. Opening with the introduction of the decadent court of Queen Regina V, who is seen drinking nakedly in bed and who commands Prince Wolfram to marry her, the film then proceeds to the encounter of two collective bodies in the rural springtime setting of Kambach Road: the cavalry squadron of Prince Wolfram in training and the orphans of a nearby convent taking a walk chaperoned by nuns. The camera tracks Wolfram's point of view as he rides along the line of convent girls until it suddenly stops with a close-up singling out Patricia Kelly, the girl played by Swanson. What follows is an exchange of looks between Wolfram and Kelly, a narrative of affects which foregrounds Swanson's face as its central locus.

While the emphasis on Swanson's face means that attention is diverted away from her body, the scene reintroduces a bodiliness that is both comic and crude. Kelly reverentially smiles at the Prince, makes a curtsy – and accidentally drops her underpants.[14] As her mishap provokes collective laughter among the Prince and his soldiers, she slowly comes to realize what has happened. Initially embarrassed by her public exposure, but then angry and determined, she disentangles her feet from her knickers and flings them in Prince Wolfram's face. Outraged at her behavior, the nuns decide to take the girls back to the convent. Together with his troops, Prince Wolfram follows them after he has sniffed at Kelly's underpants and claimed them as his token, while Kelly pleads with him for their return in a sustained exchange of flirtatious gazes, facial expressions and gestures.

Clearly all of Swanson's expressive acting in this scene – moving from reverence to insecurity, from embarrassment to anger and open flirtation – is culturally codified. Since silent film requires its audience to permanently watch the screen, her eloquent face radiates an immediacy that is both intimate and medially constructed.[15] Stroheim's cinematic language follows the classical function of the close-up as an identifying and monumentalizing means – a medial feature that distinguishes the star from other performers. Yet Swanson undercuts the mythical meaning of a single trademark image – here as everywhere else.

As I have been arguing, Swanson enacts her stardom in an ambiguous manner. Marking the beginning of the Hollywood star system, she invents herself as a public star body, while her screen performances foreground a "shrewdness about her image" (Basinger 1999: 226). As a result, she eludes stable categorizations, and her face is always more than a mythic type or trademark. On the one hand, Swanson's public offscreen persona – constructed and disseminated by press releases, newspaper articles, fan magazines and her public appearances – introduces attributes that have since come to epitomize stardom in Hollywood and elsewhere. On the other hand, her cinematic performances radiate comic vigor and resilient force. Perhaps it is because Swanson was so successful at establishing and anchoring her stardom in her contemporary public sphere that robust vitality and self-ironical distance are available to her.

At the same time, there is also a contradiction in Swanson's mobile resilience. She was immensely popular for little more than one decade, in which she starred in close to sixty films and persistently promulgated her offscreen stardom. However, in contrast to Charlie Chaplin and his fictional tramp persona or Louise Brooks in her signature role as Lulu, Swanson has enjoyed hardly any cultural afterlife. It seems as though by avoiding a consistent star image, her protean performances elude our cultural memory. Or perhaps we have forgotten her because her stardom is so unproblematic and her public bodies so unendangered.

Paradoxically the dominant afterimage of Swanson remains her embodiment of Norma Desmond and her deluded insistence on her stardom in *Sunset Boulevard*. There her appearance but also her unrivalled self-parody lend credibility to Wilder's homage to Hollywood and its past. In fact, if we pay close attention to the film's battle between word and image, between the young screenplay writer Joe Gillis and the ageing movie star Norma Desmond, we notice that it is the figure of Swanson herself who emerges triumphant: The old Hollywood mansion is filled by the original glamour shots made at the height of her career. If, however, we want to witness her protean performances, we have to return to her silent films. There she has not one, but many different faces.

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Filmography

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Notes

[*] This article was originally written in 2006. Since then, a number of publications have appeared that are of some relevance to the discussion at hand but have not been included in detail: Basinger (2007); Roach (2007); Jatho/Rother (2007); Dyhouse (2010); as well as the October 2011 *PMLA* volume on the special topic "Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety."

[1] On the distinction between the star and other performers as well as the emergence of the star system in the United States see deCordova's *Pictures Personalities* (deCordova 2001).

[2] Charyn describes Swanson as " 'the most imitated woman' in the world" (Charyn 1996: 98). Similarly Tapert underlines that "[b]y 1926 she was the official queen of the screen, the most imitated movie star in the world, and the most photographed woman of the decade" (Tapert 1998: 20).

[3] See Swanson's description of this event at the beginning of her autobiography (Swanson 1980: 5-11).

[4] Later Marilyn Monroe was to make a similar statement, though from a different position. Often finding herself in opposition to the studio bosses and emphasizing that her audience was the only firm ground she ever had to stand on, she once declared that "only the public can make a star. [...] It's the studios who try to make a system out of it" (quoted in Belton 2005: 102).

[5] As Richard Ellis has pointed out to me, there may well be a reference in this scene to the mutoscope, an early motion-picture device which allowed one patron at a time to watch – or peep at – a short, often soft-core pornographic scene. Popular on pleasure piers, the mutoscope was known in the United Kingdom as "What-the-butler-saw machines." Note that in *Male and Female*, the boy servant is caught and reprimanded by the butler, who, however, cannot help smiling in complicity.

[6] On the distinction between fame and more recent forms of celebrity (see Braudy 1996, Straumann 2002).

[7] See Basinger (1999: 212) and Dyer (1998: 36-37), whose classic study on stars contains a 1932 fashion preview from the American film fan magazine *Photoplay*.

[8] Swanson begins her autobiography with a classical narrative about the personal sacrifice required by stardom. Because she assumed that with a child conceived before her marriage to Henri Marquis de la Falaise "my career would be finished" (4), she had a secret abortion, which not only caused near-fatal complications but also deeply troubled her. Yet following her typical resilience – "I am a very pragmatic person" (1980:5) – her narrative balances this dark underside of her stardom with her triumphal return to Hollywood as "Cinderella married to the prince [Henri], but also Lazarus risen from the dead" (1980: 9).

[9] In my references to the burlesque I am indebted to Anna-Katharina Straumann, who analyzes silent film comedies in view of the (rare) combination of femininity and the burlesque body (Straumann 2006). I would also like to thank my colleague Anita Gertiser, who was not only willing to discuss my examples, but also generously shared her expertise in film history.

[10] This is a point which I owe again to Anna-Katharina Straumann and her analysis of *Stage Struck*.

[11] Not just for her fans but also for Swanson herself, her greatest triumph was the marriage to her third husband, Henri Marquis de la Falaise de la Coudraye. Even though the Marquis, her interpreter on the set of *Madame Sans-Gêne*, was an impoverished aristocrat, he represented culture and high society to her. Not only does Swanson's autobiography open with a reference to the wedding, but when an interviewer suggested fifty years later that *Sunset Boulevard* must have been her most important moment, she contradicted him: "Absolutely not. The great event for me was having been the first star to marry a nobleman" (quoted in Tapert 1998: 25).

[12] Retrospectively Salome is of course also a meta-textual reference to *Sunset Boulevard*, where Desmond writes a Salome script for her comeback and actually enacts her scenario by shooting Gillis and walking down the stairs towards the press in her Salome poses and gestures.

[13] On the cult of Valentino see Hansen's discussion of female spectatorship in connection with his body (Hansen 1991: 245-294).

[14] As Basinger remarks, "no other star ever had as much trouble with undergarments as Gloria Swanson" (1999: 227). Her lost film *Madame Sans-Gêne* (1925) features a scene in which she loses her petticoat and in *Manhandled* (1924) her underpants fall down while she imitates the dance of the Follies star Ann Pennington.

[15] For a discussion of the face and the close-up contemporary with Swanson's films see Balázs (2001).